

White Sands Test Facility reaches for and grabs OSHA Star

For three years, the NASA Johnson Space Center White Sands Test Facility (WSTF) in Las Cruces, N.M., prepared for an audit by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. The facility hoped to earn OSHA's Star safety rating – the highest awarded by the group.

In February, WSTF employees' hard work paid off when the facility was awarded two OSHA Star flags: One for NASA and another for a contractor, Honeywell Technology Solutions Inc. (HTSI). The rating is based on OSHA's four criteria for safety performance: Management Leadership and Employee Involvement; Worksite Analysis; Hazard Prevention and Control; and Safety and Health Training.

OSHA believes that its award program has many benefits:

- ☛ Increased employee motivation to work safely
- ☛ Better quality and productivity
- ☛ Reduced workers' compensation costs
- ☛ Recognition in the community
- ☛ A reduction in lost work days
- ☛ An improvement of programs that are already considered satisfactory

The award was presented on Feb. 26 in the WSTF's Rotunda, and is the first ever awarded in the state of New Mexico.

Dignitaries attending the event were complimentary and encouraging in their remarks. Stacy Nakamura, of JSC's Quality, Assurance, Reliability and Safety Office, told the WSTF audience, "To all my friends here at WSTF: Enjoy the moment. I salute you."

Out of more than 6 million worksites in the United States, only 719 have received the Star safety rating. It is even more impressive that WSTF should be awarded the Star, given the dangerous nature of the facility's work. WSTF supports the Space Shuttle with rocket engine testing, fuel handling, and materials and component testing.

However, obtaining the Star rating was not the main goal. WSTF NASA Manager Joseph Fries was more concerned with creating a genuine "safety culture," which he likened to a family in which everyone cares about each other's safety and health.

"I wanted the safety culture to be in place before we applied for the Star," Fries said. "I was concerned about employees' safety more so than I was about receiving a Star rating."

Throughout the implementation period of the safety culture at WSTF, Fries continued to speak out on employees' safety and health as being more important than obtaining the Star certification.

After having received the Star, Fries called the certification "a milestone in improving our Safety and Health Program."

Rod Drake, OSHA auditor, said at the audit, "When management and employees get together, it equals culture change."

Drake also that he was "really amazed at the progress when more employees are put into the system. You have a good group of people here – a VPP family."

To achieve this attitude at WSTF, Fries established the Keystone Committee, a safety-awareness committee, to oversee the implementation of the safety culture at WSTF. Past and present members of the Keystone Committee are: Danny Aranda, John Bernal, Radel Bunker-Farrah, Denzil Burnam, Robert Cort, Charlie Collins, Eric Crespin, Marc Dunford, Raul Estrada, Holger Fischer, Sean Gates, Pete Garcia, Everett Havenor, John Kelley, Jose Lopez, Victor Meza, Jesse Wells, John Bernal, Bob Kowalski, Jim Wing, Victor Maese, Melanie Galt, Cheerie Patneade, Jill Rollings, K. C. Schlotterbeck, Case Van Dyke, Richard Von Wolff and Larry Wiedmaier.

Holger Fischer, committee chair, said: "During the past three years, the Keystone Committee operated on the principle that we were badgeless during the meetings."

Fischer added, "Only the safety and health of our employees mattered, not whether we were civil service or contractor, salaried or hourly. We worked as a team."

Mark Leifeste, WSTF HTSI Program Manager, agreed with Fischer.

"The VPP flag has given us a new slant on our identity. Our site has always had a reputation for being very responsive through our capabilities, a reputation that few places can match," he said.

"What we have now is objective evidence that we can perform hazardous jobs and do them safely. We are proving to a critical eye that we can break down the stereotypical ideals between management and employees and work together in the best interest of the site."

Sarah Hearrell, OSHA audit team leader, identified characteristics that OSHA looks for in Star-quality facilities. "Basically, we look for employee empowerment," she said. "We want to see employees taking possession of their own health and safety."

Hearrell, who has worked on both sides of the industry as an enforcer of OSHA regulations and now as an auditor, complimented WSTF as a great place to work with its "unique approach to the work force industry in helping the government with its space program."

Robert Baker, former WSTF HTSI Program Manager, was proud of the test facility receiving the Star certification.

"It's an outstanding accomplishment," he said. "I think the future holds room for improvement. If we continue to enhance and improve the safety culture, then I think there is the achievable possibility of zero accidents and injury."

Fries said he was proud of the way WSTF accomplished this goal but, like Baker, he hopes for even more safety success in the future.

"We must continue to focus on improving our safety program," he said. "Now that the attainment of the flag can no longer be considered the measure of our success, we must establish new methods for measuring success."

Fries identified communication as a possible future focus for WSTF, calling it "the mechanism that will thrust us forward toward a safer and healthier workplace in the future." ♦

